

A CLOSER LOOK AT METAPHYSIC STRATEGIES AND LANGUAGE ACHIEVEMENT OF TERTIARY LEVEL ARABIC LEARNERS

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Abstract

Surveys have shown that there is a significant relationship between the use of Language Learning Strategies (LLS) and the level of language mastery. There are also studies that attempt to explore whether students who are excellent in language use the LLS frequently and a lot. Therefore, this paper describes a study which has been designed to analyze the relationship between the application of metaphysic strategies and the Arabic language level of achievement. The research data was collected by using the self access questionnaire and Arabic language test. The research subjects consist of 385 undergraduate students who are taking an Arabic language course at the Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu. Descriptive statistics, including Pearson and Independent Sample T-Test were used to analyze the relationship between metaphysic strategies used and the level of Arabic language achievement. The findings from this study were: 1) there was a significant correlation between metaphysic strategies used and the language achievement. 2) there were significant differences in metaphysic strategies used based on the level of Arabic language achievement. 3) Overall, good language learners possess a richer repertoire of strategies and employ metaphysic strategies more frequently than did their counterparts in lower achievement level categories.

Keywords:

language learning strategies; metaphysic strategy; Arabic language; excellent language learner; less excellent language learner

INTRODUCTION

Among the active and growing language learning research field in recent years is the Language Learning Strategies (LLS) (MacIntyre 1994). This increased interest in LLS is due in large part to a shift of emphasis to the learner and learner centered instruction. The LLS research was pioneered by Aaron Carton in the year 1966 (Rubin 1987) and it has been further explored and studied until now by the scholars from various countries (Cohen & Macaro 2007). Various theories, taxonomies, inventories, findings, models and the likes have materialized. Furthermore, the field has evolved to a state of having more functional, practical and hands on attributes, so much so that it has helped teachers and students in conducting the language teaching and learning process more easily, systematically, effectively and successfully (Brown 2002; Kamarul Shukri, Mohamed Amin, Zamri & Nik Mohd Rahimi 2009a; Mohamed Amin & Mohd Zaki 2010; Spencer & Guillaume 2009).

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The LLS researchers have come up with various taxonomies which address different domains. For instance, Bialystok (1978) has formed his LLS taxonomy based on four domains which are inferencing, monitoring, formal practicing, and functional practicing. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) divided LLS to three domains, namely metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective. Stern (1992) classified LLS to five parts; Planning and management, cognitive, communicative-experiential, interpersonal, and affective strategies. Oxford (1990) has divided the main domains into memory, cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, social, and affective which form an instrument known as SILL (Strategy Inventory of Language Learning). In short, researches keep on striving to develop taxonomies and explore new LLS domains.

Among the main language learning strategy domain explored was the metaphysic strategy. It is the LLS domain identified through studies involving the following elements: target language, learning background, culture and religion (Kamarul Shukri, Mohamed Amin, Nik Mohd Rahimi & Zamri 2009b). This strategy entails an action or operation in learning which is driven by factors concerning religious practices that are closely related to the target language to enhance language proficiency and achievement (Kamarul Shukri 2009). For example, reading al-Quran to correct and improve the fluency of Arabic pronunciation. The development of this domain is based on concept and theory, inventory development procedure, and establishing proof through empirical data.

It is believed that elements such as language status, ethnic, culture, and believes or religion can make up a language learning strategy domain that is capable of producing specific behaviour and thinking process to facilitate language learning. In fact, normal observations indicate that students of different ethnics, cultures and citizenships have different learning styles (Pennycook 1997; Pierson 1996). Therefore, it is understandable that some studies have proven that the status of target language (Nisbet 2002; Oxford & Shearin 1994), culture (Griffiths 2003; Macaro 2001) and believes or religions (Kamarul Shukri et al. 2009b) are among the variables that influence the use of LLS. Differences in language types in terms of linguistic and orthography also influence the application of strategies in the target language learning (Douglas 1992; Grabe 1986).

Based on the above statement, it is understandable that the application of metaphysic strategies is often related to the culture, religious practices, and target language status. The metaphysic strategy domain consists of eight items or strategies (Kamarul Shukri et al. 2009b), namely:

1. Practice to identify syntaxis or morphology rules that is used when reading the al-Quran.
2. Practice to identify the Arabic writing system rules (imla') used when reading the al-Quran.
3. Practice to identify the reasons for the use of Arabic grammar rules when reading the al-Quran.
4. Strive to understand or internalize the meanings of recitations in daily prayers, prayers, verses in al-Quran or al-Hadith.
5. Read the al-Quran every day to correct and improve the fluency of Arabic pronunciation.
6. Read verses in al-Quran or pray to overcome the feelings of nervousness or stressed while learning the Arabic language.
7. Perform the prayers for our wish to be granted or pray to Allah so that the learning of Arabic language will be a success.
8. Ask for blessings from teacher before sitting for the Arabic language examinations.

Several other LLS studies have also shown the existence of the metaphysic strategy domain. Researches conducted by Abu Talib (1998), Supian (2003), and Zamri (2004) on learning of the Malay language are among the studies that have indicated the existence of metaphysic construct. For instance, the outcome of Abu Talib (1998)'s research has found the two strategies. While Zamri's (2004) research succeeded in identifying the three strategies.

All the LLS domains-including metaphysic strategies-were developed to make language learning easier, fun, systematic, self-directed, and effective to improve the achievement and mastery of the target language. Hence, various researches have been conducted to study closely the relationship between LLS and language achievement.

A part of the study attempts to explore whether language students who perform well use LLS often and in high quantity (Green & Oxford 1995). Another part of the study analyzed whether the quantity and frequency of LLS usage contribute towards the progress of language skills (Park 1997). While the rest of the study focused on the cause and effect relationship which indicates that the application of strategies and the level of language mastery is complementary with each other (Bremner 1999).

Most of the studies indicated that the use of LLS has a significant relationship with the level of language skills and achievement (Green & Oxford 1995; Manghubai 1991; O'Malley et al. 1985; Wharton 2000). The excellent students were found to have used a myriad of strategies often and coordinated the usage more effectively compared to students who are weak in language. The students understood the requirements of the tasks assigned and were capable of adapting the strategies to the tasks. They were able to select, evaluate and use the LLS correctly until they succeeded in enhancing the level of language mastery. Several studies have also proven that the relationship between the use of LLS and language achievement level is a two way relationship (Bremner 1999; Ellis 1994). The use of LLS can contribute towards a higher level of language achievement. At the same time, the success of language skill mastery also helps to propel the use various types of LLS more often.

Therefore, studies concerning LLS in Malaysia should be increased to assist language students in enhancing their language skills. The performance of Arabic language proficiency which was said to be on the decline (Kamarul Shukri & Mohd Hazli 2008) was also one of the factors that sparked this study to be conducted. It is hoped that the outcome of LLS can help teachers and students of the Arabic language to develop a language learning process that is more effective, dynamic, interesting and in accordance to current demands.

It is undeniable that there are some studies that show opposite results. A study by Khaldeih (2000) which was conducted on 43 American students learning Arabic language showed that excellent and poor students used various strategies actively. While a study conducted by Chen (1990) on English language students at a foreign language institute in China found that excellent language learners used less communication strategies while implementing language tasks compared to weak students. Philips's (1990, 1991) study on 141 Asian students who were learning English language at seven universities in the United States showed that there was no difference in mean score of LLS usage among the highest group (TOEFL score: 507-600) and lowest (TOEFL score: 397-480). Instead, the middle group showed the highest strategy usage rate compared to the other two groups. Philips hypothesized that the students in the lowest group were less aware of LLS. While those in the highest group knowingly used less strategy compared to the middle group.

These different findings also justified LLS studies in the context of language learning in Malaysia to be conducted. Furthermore, the data that explains the above

scenario obtained from the researches on Arabic language learning strategies is insufficient. The difficulties in describing the pattern of relationship between language achievement and the use of LLS while learning the Arabic language is obvious. Hence, similar studies should be continued especially on different language background, culture, and population (Green & Oxford 1995; Park 1997; Wharton 2000).

METHODOLOGY

Research questions

This study was organized around the following research questions:

1. What is the usage level of metaphysic strategies by students of Arabic language course at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin?
2. Is there a significant correlation between metaphysic strategy usage score and Arabic language test marks among Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin students?
3. Is there any significant difference in the use of metaphysic strategies by respondents based on achievement level group of Arabic language course?
4. What is the shape of metaphysic strategy usage pattern based on achievement level of Arabic Language?

Participants

This quantitative study was conducted in Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu. It involves students who are taking the Arabic language course which is compulsory in the university with two credit hours. Before this, they have learned the Arabic language in secondary schools for at least five years. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) Sample Size Determination Schedule, 385 samples were selected randomly from a total population of 657 students.

Instrument

The questionnaire instrument was used to collect information on the use of Arabic language learning strategies from the respondents. The questionnaire was adapted based on six constructs (such as memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, social and affective) which were in SILL version 7.0 (Oxford, 1990) and one metaphysic construct (Kamarul Shukri 2009). It used the five point Likert rating scale. A rating scale of 1 (Never or almost never true about me) being the lowest level in the strategy usage measurement to 5 (Always or almost always true about me) being the highest level was used (refer Table 3).

Table 1 summarizes the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of internal consistency for each category of the LLS questionnaires. The Cronbach's alpha for each category and for the entire questionnaire ranges from 0.71 to 0.96: this indicates a good degree of reliability (McMillan & Schumacher 2006; Sekaran 1992).

Table 1: Internal consistency reliability of LLS questionnaire

Construct	Alpha Cronbach	Item
Memory Strategies	0.86	10
Cognitive Strategies	0.88	14

Compensation Strategies	0.83	06
Metacognitive Strategies	0.91	09
Affective Strategies	0.71	07
Social Strategies	0.81	06
Metaphysic Strategies	0.83	08
Overall LLS Items	0.96	60

Respondents were also required to sit for an Arabic language test to gauge their language achievement levels. The test questions were developed based on the course topics that they have learned. The marks are graded according to a scale whereby 80% and above is graded as A, 70% and above is B, 60% and above as C, 45% and above is D, and 44% and below is E

DATA ANALYSIS

Table 2 shows the number of respondents according to the grades of Arabic language test. The language grade was recoded based on the level of language achievement. The excellent language learners (ELL) are those who obtained grades A and B in the Arabic language test. While the less excellent language learners (LELL) are those who obtained grades C, D and E.

Table 2: Profiles of respondents based on grades and achievement levels of Arabic language

Arabic Language Grade	A	B	C	D	E	Total
Frequency	38	148	178	18	3	385
Percent	9.9	38.4	46.2	4.7	0.8	100
Language Achievement Level	Excellent Learners (n=186)		Less Excellent Learners (n=199)			

Descriptive statistics were used to identify the level of metaphysic strategies used by students of Arabic language course at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin. Interpretation of the strategy usage level was in accordance to evaluation criteria described by Oxford (1990) as shown in Table 3. This study found that on the whole the respondents use metaphysic strategies at a moderate level ($M=3.23$, $S.D.=0.78$).

Table 3: Interpretation of LLS usage level mean score

Interpretation	Behaviour Statement	Mean Score
High	Always or almost always used	4.5 to 5.0
	Usually used	3.5 to 4.4
Medium	Sometimes used	2.5 to 3.4
Low	Generally not used	1.5 to 2.4
	Never or almost never used	1.0 to 1.4

In order to answer the second research question, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to investigate the correlation between metaphysic strategies used and Arabic test score. Before performing a correlation test, preliminary analyses were conducted to fulfill the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity (Bryman & Cramer 2005; Coakes 2005; Pallant 2001). The data provides strong evidence to reject the first null hypothesis which posits that there is no significant correlation between the use of metaphysic strategies and Arabic test score among of the students. The Pearson analysis (see Table 4) indicates that there is a significant positive correlation between

metaphysic strategies employment and Arabic test scores ($r = 0.298$, $p < 0.05$), thus higher use of metaphysic strategies is associated with higher levels Arabic test score. The value of the Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.298 indicating that there is a weak correlation (Cohen 1988; Davies 1971) between metaphysic strategies use and language test score among the Arabic learners.

Table 4: Correlation between Metaphysic Strategy use and Arabic test score(N=385)

Correlation Between Variables	r	r ²	Sig.
Metaphysic Strategy Use – Arabic Test Scores	0.298	0.088	0.000

Independent sample t-test was used to identify whether or not there was a significant difference in the use of metaphysic strategies among excellent language learners and less excellent language learners. Test results (refer Table 5) showed that there was a significant difference in the use of metaphysic strategies based on Arabic language achievement level of the respondents with a value of $t(383) = 4.18$, $p < 0.05$. This means that the second null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant difference in the use of metaphysic strategies by the respondents based on achievement level groups of Arabic language course is successfully rejected. The mean score showed that excellent learners ($M=3.39$, $S.D.=0.79$) use metaphysic strategies more often compared to the less excellent learners ($M=3.07$, $S.D.=0.74$). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 0.32 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -0.48 to -0.17) was very small (eta squared = 0.043) (Cohen 1988).

Table 5: Independent sample T-Test: The use Of Metaphysic Strategies based on language achievement level (N=385).

Arabic Language Grade	N	Mean	S.D.	D.F.	t	Sig
Excellent Language Learners	186	3.39	0.79	383	4.18	0.00
Less Excellent Language Learners	199	3.07	0.74			

In order to answer the forth research question, the mean for each item based on Arabic Language achievement level group was provided with an interpretation. With this, the usage pattern of metaphysic strategies can be determined and the usage level of strategies by the excellent learners and less excellent learners can be figured out in detail. Table 6 shows that excellent learners use all metaphysic strategies more often compared to less excellent learners. Excellent learners use five strategies (4, 5, 6, 7 & 8) at the high level and three strategies (1, 2 & 3) at the moderate level.

Table 6: Mean and standard deviation of the use of Metaphysic Strategies based on language achievement level (N=385)

No.	Metaphysic Strategy	ELL(n=186)			LELL(n=186)		
		M	S.D.	Interpretation	M	S.D.	Interpretation
1.	I practice to identify syntax or morphology rule that is used while reading the al-Quran.	2.87	1.25	Moderate	2.41	1.07	Low
2.	I practice to identify Arabic writing system rule (<i>imla'</i>) that is used while reading	2.77	1.31	Moderate	2.41	1.14	Low

	the al-Quran.						
3.	I practice to identify the reason for using the Arabic grammatical rule while reading the al-Quran.	2.96	1.31	Moderate	2.47	1.11	Low
4.	I make an effort to understand or internalise the meaning of the verses recited in daily prayers, prayers, verses in al-Quran or al-Hadith.]	3.79	1.02	High	3.43	1.02	Moderate
5.	I read al-Quran every day to correct and improve my Arabic language pronunciation.	3.67	1.12	High	3.34	1.11	Moderate
6.	I read the verses in al-Quran to overcome the feelings of anxiety or tense while learning Arabic language.	3.64	1.14	High	3.39	1.15	Moderate
7.	I perform prayers for my wish to be granted by Allah so that I will succeed in learning the Arabic language.	3.61	1.14	High	3.39	1.17	Moderate
8.	I seek for blessings from teachers before sitting for Arabic language tests.	3.87	1.15	High	3.72	1.07	High
Overall		3.39	0.79	Moderate	3.07	0.74	Moderate

While the less excellent learners only use one strategy (8) at the high level, four strategies (4, 5, 6 & 7) at the moderate level and three strategies (1, 2 & 3) at the low level. This study also shows that there are three strategies (1, 2 & 3) that are least used by both learner groups. On the other hand, strategy 8 is the strategy that is used most often by both achievement groups.

Even though the usage level of metaphysic strategies by both groups is at the moderate level, there is a vast difference between the mean values for both. In fact, the mean score for the ELL group is at the end of the scale approaching the high usage level. The t-test results have proven that there is a significant difference in the overall use of metaphysic strategies based on the Arabic language achievement level groups.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION

The use metaphysic strategies by respondents at moderate level is consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Kamarul Shukri (2009) on students of Arabic language in religious secondary schools, Terengganu. Among the factors influencing the findings are insufficient time allocated for learning Arabic language in the classrooms as well as out of classrooms. The learning of Arabic language course in class only involved two contact hours a week. While the learning time out of class which entails working on assignments, doing revisions and the likes is very minimal. Table 7 shows that 50.9% of students learn Arabic language for only one hour or not at all out of class in a week. Only 0.8% of the students allocate more than five hours a week learning Arabic language out of class. On top of that, students only have the opportunity to learn Arabic language course for one semester (14 weeks) through out their academic year.

The contemporary approach in learning language is more inclined towards the involvement of students in role playing, simulation practices, developing creative and imaginative learning out of class. While language learning activities are longer and occur more often out of class compared to in class. Some language teachers structure language learning opportunities of their students out of class in the ratio three to one (Nunan 1999). In other words, if the students spend one hour for language learning in class, they need to learn the language out of class for three hours systematically.

Table 7: Total number of hours of learning Arabic language out of class per week

Learning Hours Per Week	Number Of Students	Percentage
0-1	196	50.9
2-3	168	43.6
4-5	18	4.7
6-7	2	0.5
> 7	1	0.3

Therefore, if language learning time in and out of class is not much, the students do not have the opportunity to carry out activities and use the language as much as possible. This contributes to the fact that students do not use LLS as much. This was proven by several studies which showed that the duration of learning has an influence on the use of LLS.

The positive value of correlation multiplier shows that there is a positive correlation between the use of metaphysic strategies and language achievement level. Even though the positive value does not refer to the cause and effect relationship, it is enough to show that the metaphysic strategies contribute towards improving the language skills of learners. The effect will be even bigger when it is used along with other learning strategy domains.

Research findings showing ELL using metaphysic strategies more often compared to LELL are in line with several other studies (Abu Talib 1998; Kamarul Shukri et al. 2009b; Zamri 2004). A quantitative study conducted by Abu Talib (1998) found that ELL use this type of strategy at a rather high level compared to the LELL while learning the Malay language. He named the strategy spiritual strategy which consists of two items: Pray to God, and work hard in a religious way to succeed in Malay language. The qualitative study by Zamri (2004) showed that ELL emphasize more and are concerned with the use of religious internalizing strategy as a driving force for the success of learning compared to their counterparts from the LELL group. They use it whether in class, outside the class, or while preparing for examinations. Among the religious internalizing strategies found were reading the holy verses, praying before studying or before examinations, always

praying and so on. A study by Kamarul Shukri et al. (2009b) on Arabic language students in the religious secondary schools in Terengganu also showed that ELL use metaphysic strategies more often compared to their counterparts in other achievement level groups.

The study also found that ELL use all the metaphysic strategies more often compared to LELL. They use five strategies at the high level and three strategies at the moderate level. While the less excellent learners only use one strategy at the high level, four strategies at the moderate level and three strategies at the low level. These findings show that ELL use a variety of or more metaphysic strategies compared to less excellent learners.

Some explanations for the findings are the characteristics of the excellent language learners themselves. Usually, ELL dare to guess and smart enough to make accurate prediction which enables them to obtain language information. They are open minded and uninhibited and ready to make and face mistakes. Excellent learners will focus their attention on language form and communication by searching for linguistic patterns to make classification, elaboration and synthesis of linguistic information. They do not only focus on basic and grammatical structure, but also focus their attention on meanings. They always look for opportunities to practice using target language (Rubin, 1975). All the characteristics of ELL is closely related to the application of metaphysic learning strategies. When students enjoy practicing the strategies and find that they are effective for learning, they will keep on using them frequently and diversify them.

The “asking for blessings or the knowledge obtained to be halal” strategy from the sub strategy “interaction to gain confidence” was used by both achievement groups more frequently compared to other strategies. Respecting the teachers and asking for blessings from them which are encouraged by Islam and are habitual in the Malay culture are practiced by students. The stronger feelings of confidence, satisfaction, and less worries in working on assignments or sitting for language tests after getting the blessings from teachers could be the reason for this strategy to be frequently used.

Apart from that, there are three strategies that are least used by both student groups. All of these strategies involved “inductive reasoning by reusing language information”. This might be because students are not pushed to synthesize language information and analyze the material whenever they have the opportunities. Besides that, the mastery level of grammatical rules and the Arabic language writing system which is below par could be the factor that inhibits them from practicing recognizing syntax rules, morphology, imla’ and the reasons for using them in verses in al-Quran and al-Hadith that are read effectively.

The study findings suggest a number of implications for Arabic language teaching and learning at university level:

1. Total contact hours and Arabic language learning level should be added until students have sufficient time to master language skills. An appropriate time should be allocated for learning to enable students to practice various LLS- especially metaphysic strategies- more often.
2. There should be more student centered learning activities and sources for language input. This way, total language learning hours outside the class can be increased and at the same time students have the opportunities to practice metaphysic strategies more frequently and systematically.
3. Lecturers or teachers should be aware of the effect they have on their students’ use of strategies. Hence, they need to plan teaching processes systematically and fulfill the need of “Student Learning Time (SLT)”.
4. Lecturers and teachers should raise students’ awareness of the usefulness of language learning strategies and their effects in enhancing language

- mastery. The LLS answering session or organization of LLS awareness workshop is an early step that can help to achieve the objective.
5. Lecturers and researchers need to explore and expand the metaphysic domain to identify new strategies that are effective in upgrading the language achievement levels of students. This can also be done by conducting studies on the use of learning strategies by the ELL.
 6. Lecturers need to strengthen students' mastery of language knowledge disciplines such as syntax, morphology, imla' and balaghah. Students are not able to use metaphysic strategies involving inductive reasoning and analysis effectively if they do not master the knowledge disciplines well.

Each of these points contribute greatly to further understanding of the relationship between the use of language learning strategies— especially metaphysic strategies – and the level of language achievement.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that there is a linear relationship between the use of metaphysic strategies and the level of language achievement. When the learning strategies are used more frequently, the mastery level or language achievements of students will increase. Therefore, it is understandable that excellent students are found to have used various types of strategies frequently compared to their counterparts in the lower achievement level groups. The metaphysic strategies that are frequently used by the ELLs need to be expanded, updated and taught to all language students so that they can help students to improve their language achievement levels, mastery and language skills. Therefore, future research should focus on methods to integrate LLS use into language instruction.

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